

THE GRILL

A Dramatic One-Act Playlet by George Woodruff Johnston



"It's Unlocked—Open! They're Gone!"

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PERSONS IN THE PLAY

Trent.....The District Attorney
Alice.....His Wife
The Commissioner of Police
The Maid

TIME—The Present

SCENE—The Library of the District Attorney's Apartment

THE curtain rises on a pitch-dark stage. Suddenly a light flashes out. For an instant it wavers, dancing this way and that. Then it shrinks into a narrow, brilliant disc. In the centre of this disc gleams the polished metal knob and encircling dial of the combination lock of a safe.

Immediately the knob is covered by the fingers of a veiled hand. Slowly they turn it back and forth until, with a perceptible click, the lock is released. The safe door is therewith swung softly open, and the disc of light, veering once more, is swallowed up in its interior. There follows the agitated rustle of paper within the safe and the muffled clink of thin metal, betraying a fumbling and hurried search. This continues until, with startling suddenness, a telephone, somewhere in the room, rings out shrilly. Instantly the light is extinguished, the safe door is closed with a heavy thud. The maid enters, switches on the lights and goes to the clamorous telephone.

MAID (at telephone)—Hello! Yes, this is the District Attorney's apartment. Just a moment, please.
(As she turns to go in search of Trent he enters, accompanied by Alice.)

MAID—Oh, Mr. Trent, the Commissioner of Police is downstairs. TRENT—Have him come right up, Mary.

MAID (at telephone)—All right! Show the gentleman up, please.
(She hangs up the receiver and begins to set the room in order. Some of the newspapers littering a small table at the left of the room she folds neatly and replaces upon it. Others she stuffs into a wastebasket standing nearby.)

ALICE—The Commissioner of Police?
TRENT—I asked him to come here to-night. I want him to go over the evidence in those graft cases with me.

ALICE (regretfully)—Oh, how I wish you'd never had anything to do with them!

(At this moment the ringing of the doorbell is heard, but the maid, paying no attention to the sound, picks up the waste-paper basket and starts out with it.)

TRENT—Never mind the basket, Mary! Go to the door! Don't keep the commissioner waiting.

(After an instant's hesitation the maid replaces the basket and leaves the room.)

ALICE (anxiously)—Don't drag those grafters into court! Don't make enemies of them! Oh, I beg you! I beg you! They'd stop at nothing. I'm worried about you every minute. Drop the case, won't you? Please—please—for my sake! (The maid and the Commissioner of Police have appeared in the hallway beyond the curtained door in time to hear Alice's appeal.)

TRENT—Dear little girl! You mustn't worry about me! I know what I'm doing. Everything will turn out all right!

MAID—Mr. Trent, the Commissioner of Police!

TRENT—Hello, Commissioner! I'm glad to see you! Let me introduce you to my wife.

COMMIS.—Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Trent.

ALICE—Thank you!

COMMIS.—Well, Trent, I'm a busy man. The sooner—

ALICE (interrupts, smiling)—I can take a hint, Commissioner. I know I'm in the way.

(She gathers up her work lying on the sofa and hunts for a thimble or some other misplaced object, her back turned to the others.)

COMMIS. (turns his back on Alice and faces Trent)—Well, how about this evidence? You think you've got 'em, do you?

TRENT—Got them, Commissioner? Got them! I've evidence enough to send a dozen of our city officials to the penitentiary!

COMMIS. (with good-humored tolerance)—I don't envy you your job, just the same! Many a hot-headed young District Attorney has gone to smash trying to do that very thing! (Alice starts, pauses in her search, glances swiftly at the commissioner, and, thereafter, listens attentively to all that is said.)

TRENT—It may be. But wait till you see the evidence I have! I want to convince you. Then I want you to back me. I need your power as Police Commissioner to uncover the big crooks—the ones who own City Hall! (He starts toward the safe, which stands against the left wall of the room.)

COMMIS.—Oh, that's it, is it? It's the men higher up you're after?

TRENT—Yes! And I'll get them yet, I don't care who they are!

COMMIS.—You've come to the right shop, Trent. I'll help you all I can.

(As he turns toward a chair at the right of the library-table he observes Alice listening to and watching him intently. He gives her one keen, swift glance and then sits down.)

ALICE (Unperturbed and smiling)—Now, I really am going. Good-night, Commissioner.

TRENT (at safe, calls crisply to Alice) Alice! Wait, please! Have you been in the safe to-night?

ALICE—I? No! Why?

TRENT—It's unlocked—open! They're gone!

ALICE—Oh, Bob! What do you mean?

TRENT—Why, the papers! The evidence I've just been talking about! Letters, affidavits, everything—gone!

COMMIS.—What!

TRENT (bitterly)—The very evidence I was going to present to the Grand Jury to-morrow! Now, I haven't a leg to stand on!

COMMIS.—Say, that's fierce! When did you last see them, Trent?

TRENT—Just before dinner. I brought them home from the office to show you and locked them up in the safe there!

COMMIS.—Anything else missing? Jewelry, money?

TRENT—Hold on! I never thought of money! (Hurriedly he takes a small japanned-tin box from the safe and hands it to Alice.)

ALICE (with trembling hands opens the box and stares bewilderedly into it)—Why, it's empty!

COMMIS.—You had money in there, did you?

ALICE (sinking into a chair)—Yes; but it wasn't mine. It belonged to the Red Cross.

COMMIS.—Who, besides yourself, knew the combination?

TRENT—Only my wife.

COMMIS.—Did anyone know you put the papers in the safe?

TRENT—Yes. I mentioned it to Mrs. Trent at dinner.

COMMIS.—Tell anybody else?

TRENT—No! Nobody!

COMMIS.—Of course, Mrs. Trent, you couldn't have had any interest in the missing papers?

(Alice, her face drawn with anxiety, her hands clasping and unclasping each other nervously, makes no reply.)

COMMIS.—Had you?

ALICE (shrinks from the Commissioner and turns toward Trent)—What does he mean? I don't understand.

TRENT (to the Commissioner, amusedly)—Of course, she hadn't. They did not concern her in the least.

COMMIS.—Are you sure you hadn't, Mrs. Trent?

TRENT—Hold on, Commissioner! Please don't forget that you're talking to my wife!

COMMIS.—That's all right. But don't you forget that I'm an officer of the law in the presence of a crime. Mrs. Trent, tell me—just what was your interest?

TRENT—Stop right there! I won't have my wife grilled by you or any other man.

COMMIS.—That's so? Well, you wouldn't stop me doing my duty just because a member of your family was involved, would you? Once more, Mrs. Trent. Did you have any interest in those papers or not? What's the answer?

ALICE (confused, hesitating)—No! Yes! I mean—

COMMIS.—Well, what do you mean? Want me to tell you? You were afraid to have your husband use this evidence. I heard you say so when I came in here. That's why you lifted the papers from the safe—tried to suppress them!

ALICE (much moved)—I? I try to suppress them? I love my husband, Commissioner! Why should I seek to ruin him?

COMMIS.—Well, what was it, then? You were the only person who could open the safe, because you were the only one besides Trent who knew the combination! You went into it for something! For what—money?

ALICE—Why should I rob the safe when I'd have a perfect right to take the money out of it, here and now, right before your eyes? Don't be absurd, commissioner!

COMMIS.—See here! You've squirmed out of every question I've asked you so far. What I want to know is this: Did you or did you not enter that safe to-night? Answer me. "Yes" or "No!"

ALICE (with spirit)—No! Most decidedly, no! Until just now I haven't even been in this room to-day!

COMMIS. (after a moment's reflection, to Trent, curtly)—I want to see your servants; first, the girl who opened the door for me.

(Trent pushes a wall-button and then returns to the library table.)

MAID (enters)—Did you ring, Mr. Trent?

COMMIS.—Come here! What's your name?

MAID—Mary; Mary Evans, sir.

COMMIS.—Well, Mary Evans, did you see Mrs. Trent in this room around dinner time?

MAID—No, sir.

COMMIS.—Did you see anybody else?

MAID—No, sir; that is, nobody but Mr. Trent.

COMMIS.—Oh, Mr. Trent, was it? Where did he go when he left here? Did you notice?

MAID—To his room, I think, sir.

COMMIS.—What did you do in your room, Trent?

TRENT (impudently)—Guess!

COMMIS. (stiffly nettled)—What did you go there for? To hide something?

TRENT—Grilling me now, are you?

COMMIS.—Suppose we take a look at that room of yours!

TRENT—All right. Come along.

(Trent and the commissioner leave the room in silence.)

MAID—What's the matter, Mrs. Trent?

ALICE—Mary, are you sure about Mr. Trent? Did he go to his room after he had left this one?

MAID—Yes, ma'am.

ALICE (in growing anxiety and distress)—Did Mr. Trent—did he carry anything in his hand? He didn't, Mary; did he?

MAID—Yes, ma'am, he did; something rolled up like a piece of paper. I didn't take particular notice what it was.

COMMIS. (re-entering room with Trent)—Well, that will require some explanation. (To Alice) How much money did you have in the safe, Mrs. Trent?

ALICE (faintly, reluctantly)—I think—let me see—about twenty-five hundred dollars.

COMMIS.—Here's that amount exactly, rolled up in a Red Cross circular. This is the stuff you had in this box in that safe, isn't it?

ALICE (recoils affrightedly)—Where did you find it?

COMMIS.—In your husband's room, hidden under the mattress on his bed!

ALICE (sinks into a chair and covers her face with her hands)—No, no! I don't believe it!

MAID—Oh, Mrs. Trent, I'm awfully sorry. If I'd only known—

COMMIS.—Shut up, you! (To Trent, sneeringly) I got your number now, all right, Mr. District Attorney! Go in to submit that evidence to the Grand Jury to-morrow, were you?

Rats! Fact is, when it came to a showdown you got cold feet. And you faked this robbery to save your face. Then you pinched the kale to make people believe some ordinary yegg had tapped the safe and swiped the papers, too!

TRENT (calmly)—Robbed myself, did I? Is that what you think?

COMMIS.—Yourself? Can that! Who collected this evidence, anyhow?

TRENT—Under my direction, the District Attorney's office.

COMMIS.—Who paid for doin' it?

TRENT—The city, I suppose.

COMMIS.—It did, all right! So it was not yourself you robbed, but the city. That's a felony! (He starts toward Trent.) And I arrest you for—

ALICE (springs from her chair and interrupts impetuously)—No, no! I did it!

TRENT (in amazement)—You?

COMMIS.—So I was right in the first place! It was you who tapped the safe?

ALICE (breathlessly)—Yes!

COMMIS.—To keep your husband out of trouble?

ALICE—Yes. To-day I received an anonymous letter—threatening him. It said—it said, if he did use this evidence—the gunmen! (Shudderingly) Oh, I can't go on!

COMMIS. (coldly, incisively)—But why did you plant the money in his room?

ALICE—Why? Because—because—no, no! I didn't do that!

COMMIS.—Who did, then? How did it get there?

ALICE (her story already going to pieces, grows more and more confused and helpless)—I've no idea!

COMMIS.—Here! I'm tired of fooling! Come across! Come across, I tell you! Where are those papers?

ALICE (breaking down entirely)—Why, I don't know; I don't know where they are!

TRENT (in quiet, unemotional tones)—I know where they were a minute ago!

(The maid casts a swift, involuntary glance at Trent, then at the bookrack on the library table, and before she can control herself takes a hasty step toward the latter.)

COMMIS. (eagerly)—Where?

TRENT (nodding in the direction of the bookrack)—There!—The maid, sternly! Get me those papers!

MAID—Papers?

TRENT—Yes! The papers you hid between those books when you tried to make your getaway!

MAID (stammers)—What books?

TRENT (points to bookrack)—The books you've just been staring at! The books you've been watching every minute that you've been in this room! (Strides to the table and seizes a large packet of papers, tied about with red tape, which has been lying concealed between the books standing in the bookrack. He holds the packet up for all to see and then tosses it onto the table.) Here are the papers!

MAID—Mr. Trent, I'm an honest woman! I didn't steal your papers! I had no idea where they were!

TRENT—No? Why, you've given yourself dead away, Sadie!

MAID—Sadie! My name isn't Sadie!

TRENT (takes a photograph from his pocket and holds it out to maid)—It isn't? Sure? Well, here's a picture and description of "Combination Sadie," the wisest little safe-worker in the country, and they both fit you to a dot!

ALICE—Mary! You! Oh, now I see! You took the papers from the safe and put the money in my husband's room to cast suspicion on him!

TRENT (reading from description on back of photograph)—"Combination Sadie" has a scar on her right shoulder from a healed bullet wound." (He advances toward maid, his right hand extended. She retreats, clutching her waist at the neck. He stops his pursuit and laughingly turns to the others.) See! She's given herself away again!

COMMIS.—Hold on! What are you after? Your wife's already confessed.

TRENT—That's right! She did! But it was to a crime she'd never committed! She was trying to shield me! That's the kind of a little wife she is! (Commandingly, pointing to maid) Commissioner, now that you have a duty to do, do it! I charge that crook with burglarizing my safe! Telephone for an officer!

(The commissioner makes no movement to obey.)

TRENT (more forcibly)—Telephone for an officer!

COMMIS. (slowly and reluctantly crosses the room to the telephone)—Spring—six—thou—

MAID (dashes at commissioner, snatches the telephone from his hands and flings it to the floor, furiously)—Don't you dare to double-cross me! Who got me the job in this house, anyway? Who put me here to pinch all the evidence against those grafters I could lay my hands on? It was you—the rottenest grafter in the bunch!

TRENT—That's just what I've been waiting for—the last fact I needed!

(The commissioner, with his right hand, tries to draw his gun; with his left he grabs the packet of papers from the table.)

TRENT (with a derisive smile)—That's all right! You can have those! The real evidence is safe in my vault downtown! There's what you got! There's what's going to send you both up the river for twenty years, at least! Look!

COMMIS. (opens the packet and stands dumfounded as the scraps of waste-paper with which it is stuffed flutter to the floor.)—Waste-paper!

QUICK CURTAIN.



"You Were Afraid to Have Your Husband Use This Evidence. That's Why You Robbed the Safe."



"It Was You—the Rottenest Grafter in the Bunch!"